

What Is Guided Reading?

Guided reading enables children to practice strategies with the teacher's support, and leads to independent silent reading. NEW ZEALAND DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

As teachers we provide the range of experiences and the instruction necessary to help children become good readers early in their school careers. All children possess the fundamental attributes they need to become literate, and some may have developed a great deal of expertise in written language by the time they enter first grade. A few children may actually be reading and know how to learn more about reading. Others may know so much about written language that they can make their own way into literacy simply by encountering good texts and receiving encouragement.

But most children need teaching. Before the end of second grade the great majority of children will have become good readers and writers. There will be a range of rates of learning and, just like everything else, some children will like reading more than others and be more skilled at it. Others may need a safety net such as Reading Recovery. Basic reading, though, is within the reach of every child. The key is good first teaching.

Guided Reading Within a Literacy Program

A balanced literacy program regularly provides several kinds of reading and writing.

By reading aloud, teachers help children experience and contemplate literary work they cannot yet read. In shared reading, children participate in reading, learn critical concepts of how print works, and get the feel of reading. Literature circles enable children to think more deeply about text as they talk with one another and co-construct new understanding. It is through guided reading, however, that teachers can show children how to read and can support children as they read. Guided reading leads to the independent reading that builds the process; it is the heart of a balanced literacy program.

- It gives children the opportunity to develop as individual readers while participating in a socially supported activity.
- It gives teachers the opportunity to observe individuals as they process new texts.
- It gives individual readers the opportunity to develop reading strategies so that they can read increasingly difficult texts independently.
- It gives children enjoyable, successful experiences in reading for meaning.
- It develops the abilities needed for independent reading.

- It helps children learn how to introduce texts to themselves.

What Is Guided Reading?

Guided reading is a context in which a teacher supports each reader's development of effective strategies for processing novel texts at increasingly challenging levels of difficulty. The teacher works with a small group of children who use similar reading processes and are able to read similar levels of text with support. The teacher introduces a text to this small group, works briefly with individuals in the group as they read it, may select one or two teaching points to present to the group following the reading, and may ask the children to take part in an extension of their reading. The text is one that offers the children a minimum of new things to learn; that is, the children can read it with the strategies they currently have, but it provides opportunity for a small amount of new learning.

The purpose of guided reading is to enable children to use and develop strategies "on the run." They are enjoying the story because they can understand it; it is accessible to them through their own strategies supported by the teacher's introduction. They focus primarily on constructing meaning while using problem-solving strategies to figure out words they don't know, deal with tricky sentence structure, and understand concepts or ideas they have not previously met in print. The idea is for children to take on novel texts, read them at once with a minimum of support, and read many of them again and again for independence and fluency.

The ultimate goal in guided reading is to help children learn how to use independent reading strategies successfully. Teachers, based on their knowledge of children, possible texts, and the processes involved in reading and learning to read, make a series of complex decisions that influence and mediate literacy for the young children in the

group. Guided reading also involves ongoing observation and assessment that inform the teacher's interactions with individuals in the group and help the teacher select appropriate texts.

A sample guided reading lesson

Pat is working with five first graders, all of whom can read texts with natural language patterns and two or three lines of print per page. Each child has a body of "known" words that she recognizes quickly. The words each child knows are not identical, of course, but their repertoires overlap. All five children can write their name and many other words; they can hear sounds in words (most of the beginning and ending consonants) and use their letter-sound knowledge to construct words as they write their own messages.

Pat uses her detailed knowledge of the children to select a new book for today, one that will be easy for the children to read, so that accuracy is not an issue. Instead, Pat wants to focus on building the problem-solving abilities or processing power of each child in the group. She has a large selection of books from which to choose, but she has made it easier for herself by organizing them by level of difficulty. For this group, she selects books from level C. About ten titles are available in her collection of guided reading books. This group may read five or six of the titles on this level or may move to the next level more rapidly. Pat will be thinking about this decision as she works with and observes the group.

Today, she pulls out five copies of *Spider*, *Spider* by Joy Cowley. She calls the group members together, and they sit with her at a small table. (Sometimes she sits with them on the rug.) First, she introduces the book. For this group, Pat decides to talk about most of the pictures and to use some of the language of the book. This is the group's first book on this level and some of the language patterns and words may be difficult for them. Her introduction is informative but brief.

She shows the book to the children, making sure each child can see the pictures and print. Several children notice things in the pictures and either ask questions or make comments. For example, David notices the familiar word *no*. Janna says she doesn't like spiders.

After the introduction, Pat gives each child a copy of the book and asks them to look at the pictures. There is a bit more conversation as the children notice and point out things in the pictures. She also asks them to locate the word *come* on several pages. Then she tells the children to get started with their reading. Each child reads the whole book to himself while Pat observes. She may interact briefly with some of the children to encourage them to think about the story and use strategies to solve difficulties, but she tries not to interrupt. Today, Pat notices that *Spider, Spider* is very easy for David and may not be offering him enough of a challenge; she thinks David may need to work with another group.

All the children are able to read the book, but Pat notices that several of them have had to do some problem solving on the word *not*. Most were successful. For example, on the line "No, no, Spider, not me," Shana read accurately up to the word *not* and then said, "No, no, what's that word?" showing that she recognized something about it. She went on to the word *me*, but then stopped, went back to the beginning of the line and read it accurately. This behavior provides evidence that Shana was able to check on her own reading (self-monitoring), to search for more information, and to self-correct.

After the reading, Pat takes the children back to page 3 in the story. She writes the word *no* on a white board on the easel that is always nearby. She asks the children to read the word. Then she writes *not*, and says, "Some of you noticed that this new word is like *no*." She asks several children to read the words, pointing out the part that is alike and the different ending. When she asks children to read the word *not*, she empha-

sizes the *t* at the end. Then she asks them to locate *not* in the text. She is trying to help them realize that a good reading strategy is to think of a word like the one you are trying to solve and also to notice word endings and beginnings. Finally, Pat asks the children to read, "No, no, Spider, not me" in unison with fluency and phrasing.

Several children say that they like the book and want to read it again, so Pat adds it to the "browsing box" of previously read texts. Pat dismisses the group without extending the text through another activity. Occasionally, the books read by the group lead to additional activities, but Pat places great value on children's having the opportunity to read many new texts and to reread familiar ones. She thinks that extending every book through art, writing, or drama is impractical and could interfere with time needed to read widely, enjoying and practicing the process.

She asks Janna to stay and takes a running record of Janna's reading of the new book the children read the last time they met. This gives her a chance to observe Janna's independent reading of a text that has been read once before. Pat rotates the children and takes a running record on each of the five about every three weeks.

Pat's interactions with the group will change over time. Children take increasing responsibility for the first reading of a text. Conversation between Pat and the children is woven throughout guided reading, before, during, and after, but the main discussion times either precede or follow reading the story.

Essential components

This example illustrates some of the essential components of the process—observation, powerful examples, and support for young readers. We wish to make our definition of guided reading very clear. While there are many adjustments and variations related to the age and level of children, in guided reading:

- A teacher works with a small group.
- Children in the group are similar in their development of a reading process and are able to read about the same level of text.
- Teachers introduce the stories and assist children's reading in ways that help to develop independent reading strategies.
- Each child reads the whole text.
- The goal is for children to read independently and silently.
- The emphasis is on reading increasingly challenging books over time.
- Children are grouped and regrouped in a dynamic process that involves ongoing observation and assessment.

The overall purpose of guided reading is to enable children to read for meaning at all times. The instruction may involve brief detours to focus children's attention on detail, but the construction of meaning overrides.

The place of guided reading in the child's developing knowledge

Children learn to read by reading, and reading begins long before a teacher uses guided reading in school. Early literacy learning begins almost from the moment children are born. They encounter the symbols of literacy in their world—signs for stores and restaurants, for example—and begin to connect them with their meaning. Children participate in the literacy events they find in their homes, events that are different for different children. For example, Hannah is only two years older than her brother Phillip, but they have had different literacy experiences. Hannah loves hearing books read aloud and has made her own books since she was four. Phillip also likes to be read to but not for nearly as long. Instead, he prefers to play games on the computer. At four, he was an expert at several games and could read difficult words like *shift*, *option*, and *delete*.

By participating in literacy, children

discover written language and what it is for. When they enter kindergarten, children need rich literacy experiences that will help them move from their early approximations to more refined and precise concepts of how print works. They need abundant opportunities to read and write and to connect the two processes. Interactive writing, a group writing process, provides a demonstration of how written language works, how to make links between letters, clusters of letters, and sounds. Through shared reading of their own interactive writing as well as nursery rhymes, poems, and big books, children learn some of the basic early reading behaviors, such as moving from left to right, return sweep, and one-to-one matching with the support of the teacher and peers in a group.

In kindergarten, children also learn to recognize and name the upper- and lower-case letters so that the information letters provide is more available to them. Teachers have found that the most effective way to approach letter learning is to begin with children's own names, used many different ways, and to use interactive writing extensively, being sure to work explicitly on letters. *If children do not know letters, there is no need to delay their reading of text.* They can continue to learn more about letters and words as they encounter them in texts. But teachers will want to be especially vigilant in helping children who have low letter knowledge to build their competence.

As they approach first grade, most children will have a body of knowledge that they can use as resources for reading. They have developed language systems that allow them to think about whether something "makes sense" and "sounds right." They have some knowledge of what print looks like and the kind of information it contains. Usually, they know a few letters and can write and/or read their name and a few other words. This knowledge base is enough to begin reading for the precise message of the text, and that is where guided reading begins.

A Rationale for Guided Reading

Before children go to school, the process of being able to read text that is more and more decontextualized is guided informally by the responses of caregivers and preschool teachers. Some children focus a great deal of attention on reading and writing and quickly develop deep understanding, seemingly with little effort. Others have some basic knowledge of literacy—familiarity with the language of stories and with particular letters, sounds, and words—but they need help figuring out the complex process of reading text. As they work with text, children develop a network of strategies that allow them to attend to information from different sources. Information from these sources is, for the most part, implicitly or subconsciously held, but it is the foundation for reading text.

Clay (1993a) clusters these sources of information into three categories: meaning, structure, and visual cues.

1. *Meaning cues* come from children's life experiences. Meaning is represented in their memories and in the language they use to talk about that meaning. This means that reading has to "make sense." As Holdaway (1979) says, if children have heard stories read aloud, they have formed high expectations of written language. They expect it to make sense and they expect to be intrigued by aspects of the text.
2. *Structural or syntactic cues* come from knowing how oral language is put together. Language is rule-governed; words are not strung together haphazardly but conform to rules. For example, "She wore a red dress" conforms to the syntactic rules of English. The sentence can be reconfigured in several ways and still "sound right" to an English speaker, but "she a red wore dress" is impossible. It doesn't match the rules we have all assimilated while learning to speak a language.
3. *Visual cues* come from knowing the relationship between oral language and its

graphic symbols—the letters that are formed into words divided by spaces and arranged on the page, and the conventions of print such as punctuation. A child may have learned the distinctive features of a few letters, perhaps those in her name. She may even have developed the ability to produce these letters over and over in writing. The first letters serve as exemplars, helping the child "learn how to learn": she learns what to notice about letters and how to compare letters with each other.

Children have these sources of information at their disposal but may not know how to access and use them while reading extended text. It is one thing to recognize visual features of a letter or word in isolation. It is another to use visual information that is embedded in text. The teacher mediates the process for the young reader.

It is usually not enough simply to provide children with good reading materials. Teacher guidance is essential. A major decision is selecting the texts that children encounter while they are building their reading systems. First, children must have many opportunities to read all kinds of texts. A balanced program will provide a large variety of texts organized by level of difficulty. Book selection is discussed in depth in Chapter 10, but there are two basic questions teachers should ask themselves about the books their students read every day:

1. Is the text consistently so easy that children have no opportunity to build their problem-solving strategies?
2. Is the text so difficult to process that children get no real opportunity to read?

If the answer to the first question is yes, then children may be reading but not solving the problems a more challenging text would provide. An easy text that nevertheless introduces a few unfamiliar words or language structures allows the child to practice the "in the head" operations that build the system. It is not the words that are important

but the thought processes required to figure out the new words while maintaining the meaning of the text. In the earlier *Spider*, *Spider* example, the pictures provided clear clues to the meaning, but readers had to look closely at the word *not* in the sentence “No, no, Spider, not me.” They had to examine detail while maintaining the meaning and their own sense of how language was structured. The text provided a context for using word-solving skills and for checking the process by using knowledge of the story and sentence pattern.

A child who can carry out this process on beginning texts is on the way to learning “how to learn” in reading. The process has been described by Clay (1991a) as “learning how to access visual sources of information while reading for meaning with divided attention” (p. 286). The more children use problem solving while reading for meaning, the greater and more flexible their problem-solving repertoires become. It is the responsibility of the teacher, therefore, to be sure that children receive the support and guidance they need to read challenging texts every day. Guided reading is designed to support that process.

More commonly, the second question is answered yes—children are reading texts that are too difficult for them. Our rule of thumb is that if the reader, with an introduction and support, cannot read about 90 percent of the words accurately, the text is too difficult. The accuracy analysis here is not a test of the reader but a test of the teacher’s selection and introduction of the text. A hard text for a reader does not provide an opportunity for smooth problem solving, and for meaning to guide the process. The process may break down into individual word calling (or frantic random guessing) that does not make sense and is not productive.

When children solve words using visual information, they need to be able to verify their success using meaning and structure cues. At the same time, they make predic-

tions from language structure and meaning (what the text is likely to say) while checking their predictions against the makeup of the word, asking implicitly, Does it *look* right? Accuracy of reading is not as important as learning the process of using different sources of information, self-monitoring, and cross-checking; the process is too difficult if the text is hard.

If the texts are extremely difficult, the situation is even more disastrous for the young reader. This can happen when the more inexperienced children are forced into “whole-class” reading or into reading basals that contain almost no texts a given group of children can read. In this case, the process completely breaks down and there may be bizarre responses such as “mumble reading.” Children may also attempt to read along without looking at the print, trying to remember the entire text, or just read along one step behind all the other children with almost no independent processing. The situation for the child would be something like performing in a choir without knowing the music or words.

The answer is not to eliminate whole-class experiences but to use them for activities like shared reading and interactive writing, which are designed for the class community or a small group. Nor is it practical or even desirable to teach each child individually. Guided reading takes advantage of social support and allows the teacher to operate efficiently, to work with the tension between ease and challenge that is necessary to support readers’ moving forward in their learning.

The Essentials of Guided Reading

Figure 1–1 outlines the essential elements of guided reading. It summarizes the teacher’s and children’s actions before, during, and after the reading.

What the teacher does

The teacher’s actions emerge from (1) observing the children as they read and write

The Essential Elements of Guided Reading			
	Before the reading	During the reading	After the reading
Teacher	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • selects an appropriate text, one that will be supportive but with a few problems to solve • prepares an introduction to the story • briefly introduces the story, keeping in mind the meaning, language, and visual information in the text, and the knowledge, experience, and skills of the reader • leaves some questions to be answered through reading 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “listens in” • observes the reader’s behaviors for evidence of strategy use • confirms children’s problem-solving attempts and successes • interacts with individuals to assist with problem solving at difficulty (when appropriate) • makes notes about the strategy use of individual readers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • talks about the story with the children • invites personal response • returns to the text for one or two teaching opportunities such as finding evidence or discussing problem-solving • assesses children’s understanding of what they read • sometimes engages the children in extending the story through such activities as drama, writing, art, or more reading
Children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • engage in a conversation about the story • raise questions • build expectations • notice information in the text 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • read the whole text or a unified part to themselves (softly or silently) • request help in problem solving when needed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • talk about the story • check predictions and react personally to the story or information • revisit the text at points of problem solving as guided by the teacher • may reread the story to a partner or independently • sometimes engage in activities that involve extending and responding to the text (such as drama or journal writing)

FIGURE 1-1 The essential elements of guided reading

and (2) studying and analyzing the available texts. The teacher’s task is complex because he must constantly keep in mind text characteristics, reader characteristics, and a growing knowledge of the reading process and how people build this process in unique ways over time.

Before the reading

Knowing the individuals in the small group, the teacher selects a new text to introduce. He carefully matches the readers to a text that offers an appropriate level of support but also includes some challenges. Each new text provided to the group should have a few

new things to learn but not so many that children have to struggle. The teacher's goal is children's successful problem solving on an extended piece of text.

Introductions are brief and vary with each book. They also vary according to the readers' interests and needs and the characteristics of the text. The teacher's goal is to interest the children in the story, relate it to their experience, and provide a frame of meaning that will support problem solving. He discusses the title and author and provides an overall sense of what the book is about. Based on his knowledge of the children, the teacher may suggest personal connections to the story. The introduction is conversational rather than a prescribed story review or series of questions. It uses new or important vocabulary and syntactic structures that may be unfamiliar to the group. Even proper names that may be difficult for children can be emphasized in the introduction. It "debugs" the book for the children by directing their attention to new text features they will need to use as readers.

The teacher does not "preteach" words although he may call attention to a word in context, asking children to locate it and notice specific features such as the beginning letter. The teacher guides the readers to look at the pictures and understand the structure of the story and critical aspects of meaning. When working with inexperienced readers, the teacher may go all the way through the story talking about each picture. Sometimes a briefer summary-like overview will provide enough support for children to read the text successfully. The teacher would rarely read the book to the children first: the goal is for them to read it themselves.

During the reading

Children who are just beginning to learn to read are asked to read softly to themselves; soon, they begin to read portions of the text silently. The ultimate goal of guided reading is independent silent reading. The teacher may "listen in" or ask a specific student to

read aloud softly. He looks for evidence of problem solving and intervenes as needed. His observations help him plan quickly what to teach after the first reading. This is a good time to take a few notes on a clipboard.

After the reading

After a brief response to the story, the teacher may decide to do nothing but send the group back to other literacy activities. He may, however, return to a part of the text to bring some example to the children's attention or to support children's growing strategies. He may talk with the children about the ideas in the story or ask them how they liked the story and what it made them think about. For a particular text, the teacher may want to talk about the meaning of the story more extensively. Routinely, some teachers take a running record with one reader after the others have left the area; others establish another time during the day to take several running records. The teacher keeps careful records of guided reading; these include books read, running records, and any notes on specific reading behaviors. Sometimes teachers take a brief time—no more than one or two minutes—right after the group meeting to jot down important observations while they are fresh in the mind.

What the children do

Before the reading

Children talk about the story, ask questions, and build expectations. The teacher's introduction supports their thinking about the story so that comprehension is foregrounded. Each child may be given a copy of the book to view while the teacher introduces it, or they may look at the teacher's book during the introduction and then receive the book to begin reading.

During the reading

Each child has a copy of the book and reads the whole text. The reading is usually soft or silent, but all members of the group are operating independently as readers at the same time. This is not "round robin" reading, in

which children take turns reading aloud. In guided reading each child has the opportunity to solve problems while reading extended text and attending to meaning. They construct meaning throughout the process, from their initial predictions about the story to examining the details of print in the text to their reflections after the story is read. Because their use of reading strategies are similar, the children in the group can read the carefully selected book at about the same rate and level of success, preferably with an accuracy rate above 90 percent. This procedure assures that children can process the words successfully without losing meaning; with a good introduction, they should need very little teacher help. Children sustain attention while problem solving an extended piece of text and, in doing so, build a system of strategies that they can use for reading other texts.

After the reading

Afterward children are invited to talk about the story they have read. Their individual responses are valued by the teacher. They may be guided to revisit portions of the text. A second reading of the text together at this point may be valuable if it focuses on fluent reading and smooth problem solving. Occasionally, children may be invited to extend the text through further discussion or activities such as writing, art, or drama.

Evaluating Guided Reading

As with any instructional approach, a teacher will ask herself, How do I know when I am using guided reading successfully? Ultimately, the test is whether the approach responds to the children's learning needs and helps them develop a self-extending reading system, one that fuels its own learning and enables the reader to continue to learn through the act of reading. Good readers have self-extending systems; they are independent. A teacher of guided reading does not have to wait for the results of end-of-year testing to know that the instruction

is successful. She will know that guided reading is effective if moment-to-moment observations and running records show that children are using effective reading strategies. She will also note that children are able to demonstrate effective reading behavior and read progressively more difficult texts accurately and fluently.

Children who are learning to read need to:

- Enjoy reading even when texts are challenging.
- Be successful even when texts are challenging.
- Have opportunities to problem-solve while reading.
- Read for meaning even when they must do some problem solving.
- Learn strategies they can apply to their reading of other texts.
- Use their strengths.
- Have their active problem solving confirmed.
- Use what they know to get to what they do not yet know.
- Talk about and respond to what they read.
- Expand their knowledge and understanding through reading.
- Make connections between texts they have read and between their own world knowledge and reading.

We sometimes mistakenly assume that these needs can be met just by providing good books and encouraging children to explore them. In fact, what most young readers need cannot be found in books alone. The process of reading must be dynamically supported by an interaction of text reading and good teaching. Guided reading serves this important goal.